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ABSTRACT

Intended to provide journalists with concise, authoritative background information on immigration to the United States, particularly from Latin America, this guide is one of a series treating topics of continuing concern to the U.S. media. The United States accepts more legal immigrants every year than all other nations combined: 526,000 in 1979 and 800,000 in 1980. It is those who slip into the country to work illegally--e.g., Mexicans, Cubans, Haitians--that many Americans find more troubling. The clandestine nature of illegal immigration makes it difficult to identify and describe. Determining the magnitude of the flow is critical in attempting to assess the impact and to formulate policy alternatives. The guide discusses how many illegal immigrants stay, the idea of guest workers, the effect of illegal immigration on America's unemployed, and the use of illegal labor by employers. Resources of additional information on policy alternatives are suggested. (RM)

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A MEDIA SOURCE GUIDE

Issues for the '80s

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REPORTING THE IMMIGRATION IMBROLIO

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and
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COUNCIL ON INTERNATIONAL AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS
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1982

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This guide is intended to provide working journalists with concise, authoritative background information on immigration to the United States, particularly from Latin America, along with some suggestions of sources for additional background. It was prepared by James L. Angle, Editor of National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" and former Director of Media Relations at the Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, assisted by Patricia Gonzalez.

This guide is one of the series on topics likely to be of continuing concern to the U.S. media. Additional titles and information on their availability are given on the inside back cover. Because of their experimental nature, comments and suggestions by users would be very much appreciated.

The Council on International and Public Affairs has a longstanding interest in working with the media as one of the principal instruments for enlarging American public understanding of international affairs. Through efforts such as this series of source guides for the media, it seeks to strengthen contacts between working journalists and academic and other specialists on major world regions and international problems. Concerned with pluralizing international news flows, especially from the Third World to the U.S., it works in cooperation with media and other organizations in making available additional sources of international news to the U.S. media. Further information about the Council is given on the outside back cover.

Ward Morehouse
President

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Javier worked seven days a week, ten hours a day or longer on a roofing crew in San Antonio, Texas. The pay was low; the work was hot and difficult; and he was sometimes cheated by employers. For the opportunity to have such a job, Javier had walked several hundred miles, crossed rivers and deserts, and evaded U.S. immigration authorities. When he first arrived in the United States, he had been scared and ashamed. But with assurances from friends, he came to believe that he was doing nothing wrong. After all, he harmed no one and all he did in Texas was work. Was that wrong? he asked an American journalist.*

The answer to that question depends on who you ask. It is also a question that Congress may try to answer (again) in 1982. Few communities in America have not been touched by the nation's immigration policy. If past efforts to fashion workable legislation to deal with this issue are any indication, however, a consensus will be difficult, if not impossible. The views range from those who believe that such immigration is desirable, even necessary, for continued economic growth to those who call it "as vicious and pernicious an institution as we've seen since slavery." One recent poll found that 59 percent of those surveyed believe that immigrants take away jobs that could go to Americans. While unemployment remains high, those feelings are likely to become more intense and more widespread. Twice before in our history, periods of recession and unemployment have helped to produce efforts toward a massive repatriation of Mexican workers.

Public perceptions notwithstanding, the issue is not a simple one. In order to report and explain the coming debate, the media will have to weave their way through a maze of intricate and often conflicting arguments. While the matter is indeed complex, it can be broken down into several key issues.

The United States accepts more legal immigrants every year than all other nations combined. In 1979, the U.S. received 526,000 legal immigrants; in 1980, the number was more than 800,000 including 126,000 Cubans and Haitians. All these individuals, whether they came on a quota or as a refugee, were approved and administered by U.S. authorities. But there is another, *unregulated* flow from abroad many Americans find more troubling—those who slip into the country to work illegally. While not all of them are Mexican, most of the enforcement initiatives are aimed at them and the focus of the debate is usually how to accomplish greater control over the 2000 mile border between the U.S. and Mexico.

That is clearly the emphasis of the legislative proposals before the Congress. In July 1981, the Attorney General outlined the administration's proposals for changes in immigration policy. In March 1982, Senator Alan Simpson introduced his own legislation, which is slightly more restrictive than the Reagan package. Other legislative proposals are pending in the Congress as well.

Source: The Washington Post, December 15, 1978

Mexico has long occupied the center of our attention on illegal immigration. Until the mass influx of Cubans and Haitians changed public perceptions, illegal immigration was almost always reported as a Mexican phenomenon, even though Mexican nationals only make up about 60 per cent of those who are here illegally. That was due, in part, to the fact that more than 95 per cent of the apprehensions of illegal immigrants were of Mexican nationals. The reason was, and is, simple. Most of these individuals are apprehended at the border or in workplaces

*Javier's story is part of an interesting and personal account of illegal migrants from Mexico in *The Long Road North*, by John Davidson, Doubleday and Co., 1979.

that rely on illegal labor. Thus, they are far easier to find than those who enter by other means, including those who enter legally and then overstay their visas. That is especially true given the limited budgetary and manpower resources of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Since the clandestine nature of illegal immigration makes it difficult to identify and describe, the number of apprehensions has been one of the few numbers available to journalists. To gauge the magnitude of undetected crossings into the United States, the media and the Congress have been forced to rely on the various estimates given by experts, which have varied so widely as to be meaningless. In the mid-1970's, for instance, the estimates of the number of illegal aliens in the U.S. varied from two to 20 million, with most falling in the three to 12 million range. In fact, most numbers, no matter how authoritatively they may have been used, are no more than guesses. The figures most often cited in Congress and the media have been a mixture of opinion, conjecture and projections. In spite of the lack of hard information, such estimates acquired the legitimacy of scientific data once they were cited in some official arena. Instructuve and interesting critiques of past estimates and how they were computed are found in Kenneth Roberts, *et al., The Mexican Migration Numbers Game: An Analysis of the Lesko Estimate of Undocumented Migration from Mexico to the United States.* 1978, 33 pp. (available from the Bureau of Business Research at the University of Texas, Austin, Texas 78712, for $4.00) and Charles B. Keely, "Counting the Uncountable: Estimates of Undocumented Aliens in the United States," *Population and Development Review*, 3.4 (December 1977), 473-81.

The magnitude of the flow is more than an academic question as the answer is critical for attempts to assess the impact and to formulate policy alternatives. Obviously, the impact on the labor market alone will differ significantly if the numbers are 15 million rather than three million. More important for the reporter on the local level, the impact in a particular city or region may be quite different than it is for the nation as a whole.

How Many Stay

Some coverage of immigration has confused the number of illegal immigrants that *come* here with the number that *stay* here. This oversight reflects a more basic error: the failure to distinguish the seasonal migration of many Mexican workers from the more permanent migration of most other nationalities. The percentage of those believed to return varies with the researcher, but it is clear that all Mexican workers do not stay in the United States.

Studies of earlier waves of immigrants from Europe showed a return rate of only about two percent. Many reports of Mexican immigration tended to assume the same percentage. Thus, one could read newspaper articles that referred to an estimate of several million illegal aliens here now and "more coming every day," suggesting that the flow of Mexican workers to the U.S. is cumulative. But if that were true, a far greater proportion of our population would be Mexican nationals than is the case. Most researchers who have examined this question have suggested that, in fact, the *net* flow is considerably less than public discussion suggests. One study found, for instance, that after subtracting returns from arrivals, the net increment to the permanent population of illegal immigrants is about 82,000 to 131,000. (See David M. Heer, "What Is the Annual Net Flow of Undocumented Workers to the United States?" *Demography*, Vol. 16 (1979): 417-424. See also the works of Wayne Cornelius, cited elsewhere in this article.) The Select Commission on Immigration, which completed more than two years of study in early 1981, estimated the number of those here illegally at three to six million. Most other studies report comparable numbers.

In short, it is clear that a significant portion of illegal immigration from Mexico is temporary, which is the result of several factors. First, there are historical patterns of seasonal migration to the north. Second, Mexican laborers can move back and forth between Mexico and the U.S. with some ease. In contrast, European immigrants could not return home by foot even if they wished to.

Guest Workers

The temporary character of at least part of Mexican migration has revived discussion of an old idea—the guest worker. Proponents reason that the workers will come anyway and that it is better to regulate the flow by issuing work visas to some while tightening bor-

Source:
Congressional Quarterly
May 22, 1982

der enforcement against all others.

Such proposals, like every other aspect of immigration policy, are very controversial. Partially because of abuses associated with the old Bracero Program that ended in 1962, many Hispanic groups oppose a guest worker program. A critical view of the idea from the Hispanic community is found in testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee on October 22, 1981, by MALDEF, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund. For an examination of our own experience with guest worker programs and those of other countries, see the following: *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy*, by Richard B. Craig (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971, 233 pp.) and *Guestworker Programs: Lessons from Europe*, by Phillip L. Martin (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, Washington, D.C., 1980).

What's in a Name?

The immigration debate is so contentious that there is even an argument over the proper term for an individual who comes here illegally. Almost no one today uses the term "wetback," a derogatory name in vogue in the 1950's. the term was so popular then that the federal government called its massive repatriation program "Operation Wetback." (Of course, that was before Mexico found enormous quantities of oil and the respect that always seems to accompany it.)

The official nomenclature is "illegal alien." But both Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, among others, object to its use. They say tne term suggests criminality, even though these individuals are responsible and law-abiding, aside from their violation of immigration laws. Those who object to "illegal alien" prefer "undocumented worker," which they believe is more descriptive and accurate. That is also the official term used by the government of Mexico. Mexican officials emphasize that the only crime committed by the undocumented workers is to cross the border without papers, and that, other than that, it is misleading to characterize as criminal those whose only violation is a search for employment.

One of the most adamant proponents is the Republican governor of Texas, William Clements, who is at least partially responsible for President Reagan's support for such a program. The administration has proposed an experimental program that would allow 50,000 workers a year to come here for a period of nine to twelve months. Governor Clements' support goes beyond the mere regulation of the flow in order to make it more manageable. He, along with several academic researchers, believes that the United States will *need* this source of labor as our population growth slows and our work preferences change. (He also believes, as do Mexican officials, that a guest worker program must be large enough to reflect the current appetite of the U.S. economy for Mexican labor if it is to be successful.)

Illegal Immigration and America's Unemployed

Those who hold the view above do not define this immigration as a "problem." Indeed, they believe that, within certain limits, foreign workers are a net contribution to the U.S. economy. Some researchers who have examined this issue found that undocumented workers not only provide a needed source of labor, but also pay taxes of various kinds while making few demands on social services. (For a discussion of this point as well as recent information on the impact of Mexican immigrants on receiving areas, see: Wayne Cornelius, "Mexican Immigrants in Southern California: A Summary of Current Knowledge," Working Paper Number 36, Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, California, 92093, 1982, available for $3.00.)

Of course, not everyone finds the flow of Mexican workers such a positive influence on the U.S. economy. Many labor economists believe the negative effects are inescapable. Few researchers insist that Mexican workers take jobs away from Americans on the scale generally claimed by labor groups, especially during difficult economic times. Nevertheless, some do believe that certain industries in particular parts of the country feel the impact of foreign labor. Ironically, many believe, those most likely to suffer as a result of competition are those performing unskilled jobs. Since that stratum is disproportionately occupied by minority groups, it is often Mexican-Americans who suffer as much as anyone from competition in the labor market. (that is essentially the case made by Vernon Briggs in *Mexican Migration and the U.S. Labor Market: A Mounting Issue for the Seventies* (Austin, Bureau of Business Research, Center for the Study of Human Resources, University of Texas, 1975, 37 pp.)

Those embracing this perspective also be-

lieve that, regardless of the number of workers displaced, the availability of cheap, illegal labor has another, equally disruptive result. The presence of these laborers, who will work at substandard wages and under substandard conditions, has a chilling effect on the labor market. First, unionization and/or demands for better conditions, etc., are likely to meet with failure while there is an abundance of less demanding replacements. That is equally true of wage levels, which a reservoir of cheap labor tends to depress. Thus, with a choice between American labor and cheaper illegal labor, there is little incentive for the employer to choose the former, at least under current law.

Illegal to Work--But Legal to Hire

How to discourage the use of illegal labor by employers has become one of the central issues in the policy debate. Some legislators, including Senator Edward Kennedy, say that more rigorous enforcement of the laws governing minimum wages and labor standards would eliminate the attraction to illegal labor. Others believe that it is necessary to have employer sanctions, such as a fine for each illegal laborer employed. Proposals by the administration and by Senator Alan Simpson, R-Wyoming, include employer sanctions. The administration, however, did not propose the creation of a national counterfeit-proof identification card, which employers and others claim is essential to distinguish legal from illegal labor. Hispanic groups say such a card is necessary in order to avoid discrimination against them because the employer might be afraid to take a chance with anyone who *appeared* to be Mexican. To round out this debate, civil liberties groups oppose the card because of the potential for abuse and the police-state connotations. Fiscal conservatives oppose it because of the cost.

The controversy over the national identification card illustrates the intractible nature of immigration issues and the unusual political alliances created by the debate. Consequently, legislative efforts to resolve these issues have usually become a Rubik's cube of the political arena—no matter what is proposed, the alignments never form a solid block.

Finally, any attempt to cover the issue of migration of undocumented workers must consider the origin of the workers and, thus, the origin of the problem. In Mexico's case, no matter how many jobs were available (and there are not enough), there would still be illegal immigration because of the higher, more attractive wages in the United States. Nevertheless, the Mexican government is actively trying to do two things that would alleviate some of the pressure to migrate. First, it reversed the nation's population policy overnight in 1973 and began a vigorous campaign to reduce the rate of population growth. Second, the government of Jose Lopez Portillo has attempted to use the nation's vast resources of oil and gas to encourage economic growth and greater employment. No matter how diligent, however, such programs are not likely to have any appreciable impact on employment and migration for several years. In the meantime, the flow of workers will continue across our border in search of employment. And as scholars learn more about the nature of this migration, so must journalists look more closely at the impact of undocumented workers in each community, both in economic and human terms.

Additional Information on Policy Alternatives

For a concise discussion of some of the policy alternatives, see *The Illegal Alien from Mexico: Policy Choices for an Intractable Issue*, by Sidney Weintraub and Stanley R. Ross (Austin: University of Texas, 1980, 56 pp.) and *Mexican Migration to the United States: Causes, Consequences, and U.S. Responses*, by Wayne Cornelius (Cambridge Massachusetts: Migration and Development Study Group, Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1978.

For an overview of the issues and previous research and legislation, see Charles B. Keely, "Immigration and the American Future," in *Ethnic Relations in America*, edited by Lance Liebman (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1982) and *Selected Readings on U.S. Immigration Policy and Law, A Compendium*, Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, Prepared by the Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 96th Congress, 2d Session, October 1980. This volume is a comprehensive compilation of expert testimony on the whole range of issues in illegal immigration.